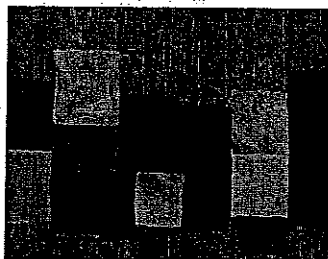


Steven Foy: Expanding the Range of Painterly Possibilities

The work of the English painter Steven Foy, whose solo exhibition, "Arrangements," was seen recently at Montserrat Contemporary Art Gallery, 547 West 25th Street, presents an excellent example of how some of our most imaginative contemporary artists are finding ways to make abstract painting new for the postmodern era.

In an artist's statement issued in connection with the show, Foy said, "The works are concerned with man-made order and organic growth, and the tension between the construction of the painting, like an industrial process and the growing of something in nature from seed." And indeed, it is the deliberate, conceptual component in Foy's work which distinguishes it in new and significant ways from the improvisational approach of the Abstract Expressionists, even while Foy's paintings have similar scale and impact and tactile surfaces that show signs of the painterly process.

While de Kooning, Pollock, and others acknowledged the inspiration of nature in the sense of movement and flux they gener-



"Arrangement #21"

ated in their compositions, they generally saw industrial processes as antithetical to the lyrical/romantic thrust of their aesthetic. Conversely, many of the Pop artists and Minimalists who succeeded them strove with Oedipal zeal for an impersonal, "manufactured" look. Working from the position that he terms "the point where more is possible,"

Foy combines elements of the natural and the manufactured in a quintessential postmodern synthesis.

Thus, his iconography ranges from roughly circular forms as organically evocative as Terry Winters' pods to rectangles and elongated shapes that could suggest clusters of multicolored tongue depressors — particularly in a composition such as "Arrangement # 59," where they are set against a background of the shade of "institutional green" that one associates with hospital walls or welfare offices. Often Foy's colors tend toward the artificial: odd shades of green-blue and mauve like nothing in nature; cake-frosting pinks bumping up against mud-pie browns. Yet they are combined in a manner that creates peculiarly delicious chromatic harmonies. In this regard, one of Foy's most majestic large canvases is the one titled "Arrangement # 21," wherein a frieze of colored squares is set against a tex-

ured gray ground, the overall effect like a monstrously mutated descendent of Paul Klee's dainty little checkerboards.

The grid has a long history in art, from when it was used by the Old Masters to scale up drawings for painting to when it came out from under the paint to become a staple of Modernism. Foy employs the grid to anchor his forms to the picture plane by scoring myriad small squares that follow the weave of the heavy cotton duck canvas on which he works into his sumptuous paint surfaces. These are particularly prominent in "Arrangement # 56," a veritable fugue of oval shapes in muted-to-strident gray and blue hues bouncing like slightly lopsided balloons off of a milky greenish ground emphatically scored to reveal the layer of blue beneath. Thus Foy weds color to texture in yet another manifestation of his quirky originality.

Indeed, while he is decidedly a player in the larger global area of today, Foy impresses this writer as one of those classic British painterly eccentrics like Hodgkin and Victor Pasmore, who seem to take wicked delight in standing abstract painting on its head. Such cheek is refreshing and much needed amid the presently reigning post-modern orthodoxies.

—Peter Wiley
Steven Foy's work is also included in the gallery's year-round salon exhibition.